

The Sufi Movement in India, UPSC Notes

July 1, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



What is Sufism?

Sufism is a term used to refer to **mystical religious ideas in Islam**. It had evolved into a well-developed movement by the 11th century.

- Sufis stress the importance of traversing the path of the Sufi pir, enabling one to establish a direct communion with the divine.
- Fundamental to Sufism is **God, man and the relation between them, which is Love**.
- The Sufis were regarded as **people who kept their hearts pure**.
- **The murid** (disciple) passes through maqamat (various stages) in this process of experiencing communication with the divine.
- **The Khanqah** (the hospice) was the centre of activities of the various Sufi orders. The khanqah was led by a **shaikh, pir or murshid (teacher)** who lived with his murids (disciples).
- By the twelfth century, the Sufis were organised in **silsilahs (orders)**. The word silsilah meant chain, signifying an unbreakable chain between the pir and the murid.
- With the death of the pir, his tomb or shrine, the dargah became a centre for his disciples and followers.

- In the 10th century, Sufism spread across important regions of the Islamic empire. Iran, Khurasan, Transoxiana, Egypt, Syria and Baghdad were important Sufi centres.

Features of the Sufi Movement in India

The Sufi movement in India commenced in the 11th century A.D. The Sufi movement, as it emerged in India, the Sufi movement had the following features:

- The Sufis were organised in a number of different **silsilahs (orders)**
- Most of these orders were **led by some prominent Sufi saint or pir**. It was named after them and was followed by his disciples.
- The Sufis believed that for union with God, one needs a spiritual guru or Pir.
- The Sufi pirs lived in Khanqahs with their disciples
- **The Khanqah** (the hospice) was the **centre of Sufi activities**
- The Khanqahs emerged as important centres of learning which were different from madrasas, the centres of theology
- Many Sufis enjoyed the **musical congregation or sama** in their Khanqahs. A musical form called the **qawwali** developed during this period.
- The ziyarat, or **pilgrimage to the tombs** of the Sufi saints, soon emerged as an important form of ritual pilgrimage.
- Most of the Sufis believed in the performance of miracles. Almost all pirs were associated with the miracles performed by them.
- The different Sufi orders had diverse approaches to the matters of polity and state.

Sufi Orders

The Sufi orders are broadly divided into two: **Ba-shara**, that is, those who followed the Islamic Law and **Be-shara**, that is, those who were not bound by it. Both types prevailed in India.

The Chishti Silsilah
Founder: Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti
First Phase:

The Chishti order was founded in a village called Khwaja Chishti (near Herat). In India, the Chishti silsilah was **founded by Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti** (born in 1142 AD), who came to India around 1192 (after the invasion of Muhammad Ghori). He made Ajmer the main centre for his teaching.

- The fame of Khwaja Muinuddin grew after he died in 1235; his grave was visited by Muhammad Tughlaq, after which Mahmud Khalji of Malwa erected the mosque and dome in the fifteenth century.
- The patronage of this dargah peaked after the reign of the Mughal emperor **Akbar**.
- **The Chishtis believed in the following:**
 - Love as the **bond** between God and the individual soul,
 - The **tolerance** between people of different faiths,
 - Acceptance of disciples, irrespective of their religious beliefs,
 - The attitude of **benevolence** to all,
 - Association with Hindu and Jain yogis, and
 - **Use of simple language.**
- **Sheikh Hamiduddin of Nagaur** and **Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki** were the disciples of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti. Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki established the Chishti presence in Delhi. Sultan Iltutmish dedicated the **Qutub Minar** to this Saint.
- The Chishti pirs emphasised the simplicity of life, poverty, humility and selfless devotion to God. They regarded the renunciation of worldly possessions as necessary for the control of the senses necessary to maintain a spiritual life.
- **Sheikh Fariduddin (Baba Farid) of Ajodhan** (Pattan in Pakistan) popularised the Chishti silsilah in modern Haryana and Punjab. He opened his door of love and generosity to all. His verses written in Punjabi are quoted in the **Adi Granth**.
- Baba Farid's most famous disciple **Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya** (1238-1325) was responsible for making Delhi an important centre of the Chishti silsilah.
 - He came to Delhi in 1259, and during his sixty years in Delhi, he saw the reign of seven sultans.
 - He preferred to shun the company of rulers and nobles and kept aloof from the state.
 - For him, renunciation meant the distribution of food and clothes to the poor.
 - Amongst his followers was the noted writer **Amir Khusrau**.

Second Phase:

- In the 13th century, the Chishti Order was established in the Deccan by **Shaikh Burhanuddin Gharib**. Between the 14th and 16th centuries, many Chishti Sufis migrated to Gulbarga.
 - This was accompanied with a change where some of the Chishtis began accepting grants and patronage from the ruling establishment.
 - **Muhammad Banda Nawaz** is among the famous pirs in the region.
 - The Deccan city of Bijapur emerged as an important centre for Sufi activity.

The Suhrawardi Silsilah

Founder: **Shihabuddin Suhrawardi**

This Silsilah was **founded by Shihabuddin Suhrawardi** in Baghdad. It was **established in India by Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariya**.

- Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariya set up a leading khanqah in **Multan**, controlled by Qubacha and visited by rulers, high government officials and wealthy merchants.
- He openly took Iltutmish's side in his struggle against Qabacha and received from him the title of **Shaikhul Islam** (Leader of Islam).
- It must be noted that, **unlike the Chishti saints**,
 - the Suhrawardis **maintained close contact with the state**.
 - They believed that a **Sufi should possess** the three attributes of **property, knowledge and hal or mystical enlightenment**.
 - Bahauddin Zakariya stressed the observance of external forms of religious belief and **advocated a combination of ilm (scholarship) and mysticism**.
 - Practices like bowing before the sheikh, presenting water to visitors and tonsuring the head at the initiation into the Order that the Chishtis had adopted were rejected.
 - **They accepted gifts, jagirs and even government posts in the ecclesiastical department**.
- The Suhrawardi silsilah was firmly **established in Punjab and Sind**.

The Naqshbandi Silsilah

Founder: **Khwaja Bahauddin Naqshbandi**

In India, this order was **established by Khwaja Bahauddin Naqshbandi**. From the beginning, this Order's mystics stressed the **Shariat's observance and denounced all innovations or biddat**.

- **Sheikh Baqi Billah**, the successor to Khawaja Bahauddin Naqshbandi, settled near Delhi. His successor **Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi** attempted to purge Islam from all liberal and what he believed were 'un-Islamic' practices.
- He opposed the **listening of sama (religious music)** and the practice of pilgrimage to the tombs of saints.
- **He opposed interaction with Hindus and Shias**. He criticised the new status accorded by Akbar to many non-Muslims, the withdrawal of the Jizyah and the ban on cow slaughter.
- He believed that he was the **mujaddid (renewer)** of the first millennium of Islam.
- He maintained that the **relationship between man and God** was between the slave and the master and not the relation of a lover and beloved.
- He emphasised the individual's unique relation of faith and responsibility to God as a creator.
- He tried to harmonise the doctrines of mysticism and the teachings of orthodox Islam.

The Qadri Silsilah

Founder: **Sheikh Abdul Qadir**

The Quadiriyya silsilah was popular in Punjab.

- Sheikh Abdul Qadir and his sons were supporters of the Mughals under **Akbar**.
- The pirs of this Order supported the concept of **Wahdat al Wajud** (unity of existence).
- Among the famous Sufis of this order was **Miyan Mir**, who had enrolled the Mughal princess Jahanara and her brother Dara as disciples. The influence of the sheikh's teachings is evident in the works of the prince.
- **Shah Badakhshani**, another pir of this silsilah, while dismissing orthodox elements, declared that the infidel who had perceived reality and recognised it was a believer and that a believer who did not recognise reality was an infidel.

Other Sufi Orders

The Firdausi order	• The Firdausi order was a branch of the Suhrawardi which established itself at Raigir in Bihar towards the end of the 14th century. • Shaikh Badruddin Samarqandi was the founder of this order. • The most prominent sufi belonging to this silsilah in India was Shaikh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri.
The Rishi order	• The Rishi order of Sufism flourished in Kashmir during the 15th and 16th centuries. • Before the emergence of this order, a religious preacher from Hamadan, Mir Saiyyid Ali Hamadani, had entered Kashmir with a group of followers to spread Islam. ◦ The missionary zeal of Hamadani, his sons and his disciples made little impact on the people of Kashmir. • The Rishi order, on the other hand, was an indigenous one established by Shaikh Nuruddin Wali. • It prospered in the rural environment of Kashmir and influenced the people's religious life during the 15th and 16th centuries. • It drew inspiration from the popular Shaivite bhakti tradition of Kashmir and was rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of the region.

The importance of the Sufi Movement

The Sufi movement made a valuable contribution to Indian society.

- Like the **Bhakti saints** who were engaged in breaking down the barriers within Hinduism, the **Sufis too infused a new liberal outlook within Islam**.
- The Sufis believed in the concept of **Wahdat-ul-Wajud (Unity of Being)**, which was promoted by Ibn-i-Arabi (1165-1240).
 - He opined that all beings are essentially one. Different religions were identical. This doctrine gained popularity in India.

- There was also much exchange of ideas between the **Sufis and Indian yogis**. In fact, the hatha-yoga treatise **Amrita Kunda** was translated into Arabic and Persian.
- A notable contribution of the Sufis was their **service to the poorer and downtrodden** sections of society.
 - Nizamuddin Auliya was famous for distributing gifts amongst the needy irrespective of religion or caste.
- According to the Sufis, the highest form of devotion to God was the **service of mankind**.
- They **treated Hindus and Muslims alike**. Amir Khusrau said, "Though the Hindu is not like me in religion, he believes in the same things that I do".
- The Sufi movement encouraged **equality and brotherhood**. In fact, The Islamic emphasis upon equality was respected far more by the Sufis than by the ulema.
- The Orthodox attacked the doctrines of the Sufis. The Sufis also **denounced the ulema**.
- The Sufi saints tried to bring about **social reforms too**.
- Like the Bhakti saints, the Sufi saints contributed significantly to the **growth of rich regional literature**.
- Most of the Sufi saints were poets who chose to write in local languages.
 - Baba Farid recommended the use of Punjabi for religious writings.
 - Shaikh Hamiduddin, before him, wrote in Hindawi. His verses are the best examples of early Hindawi translations of Persian mystical poetry.
 - **Syed Gesu Daraz** was the first writer of Deccani Hindi. He found Hindi more expressive than Persian to explain mysticism.
 - Many Sufi works were **also written in Bengali**.
- The most notable writer of this period was **Amir Khusrau** (1252-1325), a **follower of Nizamuddin Auliya**.
 - Khusrau took pride in being an Indian and looked at the history and culture of Hindustan as a part of his own tradition.
 - He wrote verses in Hindi (Hindawi) and employed the Persian metre in Hindi.
 - He created a new style called **sabaq-i-hindi**.

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/upsc-exam/the-sufi-movement/>

© Vajiram & Ravi. For personal use only.